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ABSTRACT

The Test of Standard Written English (TSWE) is a 50-item multiple choice instrument designed to assess the ability of college students to use English. In this study, based upon a sample of 45 students, the TSWE was revalidated with writing samples. The coefficient of 0.54 was most impressive given that the TSWE scores were restricted to those below the national norming population median and that the essays were graded on a pass-fail basis. Using the criterion of three standard errors of measurement from the norming population median, 14 of 25 students within the band wrote acceptable essays while all 20 students below this interval did not receive passing scores. Thus, more evidence of the validity of the TSWE was found. A model using the TSWE as a screening tool to identify which student writing samples should be evaluated was described. It would reduce costs and independently validate English-usage by reviewing writing samples with most questioned TSWE scores, i.e., those in the band between the cutting scores and within three standard errors of measurement below that criterion. (Author/JAZ)

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WRITING SAMPLES AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PLACEMENT DECISIONS

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Governors State University

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Suddick and Vaccaro (1983) described an undergraduate literate skills testing model to assess the English-usage and mathematics competencies of older, adult re-entry students enrolling at an upper-division midwestern university. This model was implemented in the fall term of 1983 and the English skills of the degree-seeking entering juniors were measured by the Test of Standard Written English (Educational Testing Service, 1974-1978).

The TSWE is a 50-item multiple-choice instrument designed to assess the ability of college students to use English. Breland (1977) validated the TSWE with writing samples. Ensuing validity studies of the TSWE have been conducted with other criteria: grades earned in freshman English classes (Bailey, 1977, and Michael and Shaffer, 1979) and one year measures of academic performance (Suddick, 1981 and 1982).

At the upper-division university, local policy allowed the students who did not pass the TSWE with a score equal to or exceeding the national norming population median the option of retesting. Suddick and Collins (1985) found a test-retest reliability coefficient of 0.78, a low bias estimate due to

restricted ranges of scores.

Effective for the fall term of 1984, the use of the TSWE was superceded by trained faculty evaluations of writing samples. Thus, the unique opportunity existed to reinvestigate the validity of the TSWE with evaluations of writing samples.

Sample

A total of 45 students who had TSWE standard scores of 43 or less (i.e., those below the norming population median standard score of 44) opted for retesting the fall term of 1984 or later. Their essays were evaluated on a pass-fail criterion. If two readers did not concur, the writing sample was reviewed by a third reader with the pass-fail grade resting with the third evaluator.

Their mean TSWE standard score for the sample was 35.0 with the standard deviation being 5.40. At retest, 14 or 31.1%, of the sample had written acceptable essays.

Procedure

The validity of the TSWE by pass-fail criterion was ascertained by the point-biserial correlation procedure. Next, the TSWE standard scores of students who passed and failed the essay were partitioned into two groups, those within and those beyond three standard errors of measurement of the passing cutting score of the TSWE.

Findings

The distribution of passes and fails by TSWE standard scores is presented in Table 1. All 14 students who passed the writing sample were within three standard errors of measurement of a standard score of 44, the national norming population median, and no student with a standard score beyond the three standard errors of measurement criterion passed the essay.

 Insert Table 1 about here

The point-biserial r between the TSWE standard score and the pass-fail status of the evaluation of the writing sample was 0.54, $df = 43$, $p < 0.001$. This relationship is most impressive given the restricted ranges of scores, i.e., TSWE measures reflecting less than half the total range and a binary essay variable.

Using the criterion of three standard errors of measurement from the national norming median, 14 of the 25 students in this band of scores wrote an acceptable essay, whereas all 20 students below this interval of scores did not receive passing scores. The contingency table for this cross-reference distribution is given in Table 2.

Insert Table 2 about here

When the data depicted in Table 2 were analyzed by the chi-test statistic corrected by the Yates correction for continuity since $df=1$, the resulting statistics was 13.74 ($p<0.001$). Thus, additional evidence of the validity of the TSWE with writing samples was evident.

Discussion

Given the state of the art of measurement, error in decision making of English skills is expected by any alternative used. However, the TSWE and evaluations of writing samples yielded most similar pass-fail results, but not identical decisions.

Given the findings of this study, the TSWE can be used to identify three groups of students: those expected to have acceptable writing skills, those with marginal writing skills, and those expected to have unacceptable writing skills. Therefore, the TSWE can be used to identify those students for whom essays should be read; for the group in this study, those were students within three standard errors of measurement of the cutting score of the norming population median.

By using the TSWE as a screening instrument to identify which student writing samples are to be evaluated, several

outcomes are expected:

1. Placement decisions, especially for students who demonstrate marginal writing skills as assessed by the TSWE, should be independently validated by writing samples.
2. Costs are reduced. Objective test scoring, in comparison to essay evaluation, is cost effective. Thus, the time and expense of reading all essays is reduced by using the model described in this proposal.

The results and findings of this study are most impressive regarding the validity of the TSWE with writing samples. The coefficient of 0.54 is remarkable given the truncated distribution of TSWE scores and pass-fail essay evaluation for subjects included in this inquiry. Evidence continues to amass regarding the validity of the TSWE and its usefulness in placing students into the curriculum.

Table 1

Frequency Distribution of Students Passing and
Failing the Writing Sample by TSWE Standard Scores

TSWE Score*	<u>Essay Evaluation</u>	
	Pass	Fail
43	2	2
42	1	0
41	2	3
40	1	0
39	3	1
38	2	1
37	1	2
36	1	0
35	1	2
34	0	2
33	0	1
32	0	3
31	0	2
30	0	3
29	0	4
28	0	1
27	0	1
26	0	1
25	0	2

*35 and higher being within three standard errors of
measurement of the national norming population median of 44.

Table 2

TSWE SCORES WITHIN AND BEYOND THREE STANDARD ERRORS OF
MEASUREMENT OF THE NORMING POPULATION MEDIAN AND THE
PASS-FAIL EVALUATIONS OF THE WRITING SAMPLE

Writing Grade	<u>Three SE Criterion</u>	
	<u>Within</u>	<u>Beyond</u>
pass	14	0
fail	11	20

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